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ABSTRACT

This study examined what values, attitudes, and behaviors are conveyed through televised sports news programming that would be expected in both sport and the world of work. The study involved viewing 102 editions of ESPN's "SportsCenter," a sports news program, and recording comments made by program anchors, news journalists, players, coaches, owners, etc., that could potentially convey to viewers what were normative or inappropriate behaviors, attitudes, and values for sport participants. A total of 1,706 comments were recorded, with an average of 17 comments per program. The recorded comments were placed into categories based on their content. A total of 494 comments were relevant to the research question. Data analysis resulted in nine categories that represented attitudes, values, and behaviors important in sport and work. Results found several major themes: the head coach is responsible for success; participate with focus, concentration, and intensity; work (fun and love are not required); give it your all and do not quit; there is more to life than sport; be confident; teamwork and cohesion are needed; win/be successful; luck, magic, and religion impact performance and success; and you can do it. The telecasts did contain comments that could socialize viewers to hold beliefs and engage in behaviors that are reflective of what is considered functional in the world of sport and the world of work. (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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Running Head: ESPN's SPORTSCENTER

ESPN's SportsCenter:
Socialization of America's Athletes, Coaches and Workers

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what values, attitudes and behaviors are conveyed through televised sports news programming which would be expected in both sport and the world of work. One hundred and two editions of ESPN's SportsCenter were viewed. Four hundred and ninety-four comments were relevant to the research question. The major themes identified were: The head coach is responsible for success; Participate with focus, concentration and intensity; Work: Fun and love are not required; Give it your all and don't quit; There's more to life than sport; Be confident; Teamwork and cohesion are needed; Win/Be successful; Luck, magic and religion impact performance and success; You can do it.

One Hundred and Two Days of ESPN's SportsCenter: Socialization of American Athletes, Coaches and Workers

Sport has been described as a microcosm of American society (Eitzen and Sage, 1997). What one observes in the world of sport, may be viewed in the larger society. Because sport acts to restrict and shape behavior, it has been referred to as an institution (Edwards, 1979; Leonard, 1993). Sport is one means by which citizens are socialized to effectively function within the social milieu.

Televised sports programming transmits and reinforces the values, beliefs and experiences found within the greater society (Coakley, 1996; Wenner, 1993). What is viewed when watching sports programming may not only shape beliefs as to what is appropriate in the sport setting, but may also shape how and what we think about the dominant aspects of sport and culture (Nixon and Frey, 1996).

Sport has been described as an environment in which athletes can learn the attitudes, values and behaviors necessary for success in an economic system based upon capitalism. It has been said that the road to the board room leads through the locker room (Leonard, 1993). Lever (1976) went so far as to state that if women were to develop proper values toward work and success, that they must participate in competitive sport. Sport helps individuals learn to achieve and to have high levels of commitment which

are both necessary in modern industrialized societies (Luschen, 1967).

In recent years there has been a steady increase in the volume of televised sports programming made available to the public (Eitzen and Sage, 1997; Nixon and Frey, 1996). One component of this barrage of sports is the televised sports news program. Sports news programs are a part of the regular Fox Sports Network, Cable News Network, ESPN and ESPN II programming schedules. An example of such a program is ESPN's SportsCenter. The programming format used in these shows allows viewers to keep abreast of the activities associated with several professional and major college sports. The programs also present in-depth analysis, interviews and reports of interest to sports fans.

If indeed, the values, attitudes and behaviors necessary for success in sport and society are transmitted through mediated sport, it is possible that they would be discernible through a careful analysis of sports news programming. The purpose of this study was to ascertain what values, attitudes and behaviors are conveyed through televised sports news programming which would be expected in both sport and the world of work.

Procedure

ESPN presents a sports news program known as SportsCenter. The broadcast lasts 60 minutes and includes

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regular commercial interruptions. On Monday through Friday mornings, a tape delayed broadcast of the previous evening's final program was shown seven times. ESPN, the network which produces SportsCenter reaches over 63 million American homes (Eitzen & Sage, 1997).

One hundred and two editions of ESPN's SportsCenter were viewed on tape delay between January, 1996 and June, 1996. Comments made by the program's anchors, news journalists, players, coaches, owners, etc., believed to potentially convey to viewers what were normative or inappropriate behaviors, attitudes and values for sports participants were recorded. Routine reporting of scores and descriptions of standard play were not recorded. Commercials, though they did contain messages, were not evaluated. Notes were not made regarding information gained visually, unless comment was made by an individual regarding the behavior.

One thousand seven hundred and six comments were recorded. The average number of comments recorded per program was seventeen. Notation was also made regarding who made the comment (sports journalist, player, coach, other), what sport was involved (football, basketball, baseball, boxing, hockey, soccer, tennis, golf, swimming), and what level the sport was played at (professional or collegiate).

The recorded comments were placed into categories based upon their content after data collection had ceased. Four hundred and ninety-four (29%) comments were recorded which were relevant to the research question.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the data collected resulted in the placement of recorded comments into nine categories which represented attitudes, values and behaviors important in sport and work. Intra-rater reliability was 100% for the comments placed in each category. Inter-rater reliability ranged from 95% to 100% for all categories. Following is a discussion of comments contained in each category

The Head Coach is Responsible for the Team's Success

Over the course of this study, it was reported on fourteen occasions that coaches were fired. On seventeen occasions, it was stated that the firing of coaches was imminent. The report of the anticipated or the actual demise of a coach was generally accompanied by a statement of the coaches' record and/or the observation was made that the coach had failed to take the team to the playoffs or "the next level." It appeared that coaches were actually responsible for their teams' success and that they were, therefore, held accountable for successes and/or failures.

The coach serves as the head of the team. In the American business world, the CEO may serve the same

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function. Professional and major college sport is big business. The bottom line is affected by the success of the team on the field. Teams must win in order to generate fan interest and to maximize profits. The message in professional sport is that the coach will be fired if the team is not successful (Leonard, 1993; Murphy, 1978; Stover, 1993). The same message is given to CEOs in the business world: be successful, or you will be replaced.

What indication is there that the coach does actually control the destiny of a team? This belief is commonly held (Eitzen and Sage, 1997). On thirty-three occasions, it was stated that the coach was in some way responsible for wins and losses. Conversely, there were thirty comments made which indicated that factors other than the coach were responsible for the success or failure of a team. Journalists commented that players make a team successful or unsuccessful on eighteen occasions, while coaches said this themselves seven times. Five times journalists reported that teams would look to recruiting or the draft in order to turn the team around.

There were nearly as many statements made indicating that the coaches did not control the fate of a team as there were indicating that they did. One set of messages results in individuals believing that the coach can, should and must make whatever collection of athletes they are given into

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winners. Coaches feel compelled to push their charges toward achieving the championship. The athletes are sometimes overtrained and abused as they progress down a trail strewn with losses and disappointment. Coaches question the dedication and the will of the athletes and occasionally that of themselves. There may be frustration, anger and disappointment.

How many leaders in the business world are pressured to produce when they are given poorly trained and/or poorly motivated workers? What is the effect of workers that are limited in their intelligence and creativity? If production does not reach quotas, those in charge are fired. Certainly as the leaders strive for success, they experience great pressure and frequent disappointment.

The second set of messages, if perceived and understood, would potentially result in a different attitude and set of behaviors on the part of the coach. Players have a great impact upon the success of any team. Some players are more gifted than others. Some are more intelligent. Still others are more focused. Generally, the more gifted the players on a team, the more successful the team will be. Players such as Michael Jordan and Kara Wolters are not in great supply and it is a rare athlete that can be coached to reach their level of excellence. Further, coaches cannot control injuries, illnesses, trades or transfers. The

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belief that coaches really do control the fate of their teams is a popular American myth and it is presented to the public on programs such as SportsCenter.

It has been said that in order to be a successful leader, individuals should surround themselves with outstanding individuals. One college basketball coach stated to a group of aspiring coaches that if they hope to be successful, they had better surround themselves with successful people (Eitzen, 1996). This would seem to be true in sport and in the world of work. Ultimately, the coach or CEO will be held accountable for the performance of the organization/team, despite the fact that they cannot directly control the ultimate level of success achieved.

Be Focused, Concentrate and Work with Intensity

There were forty-seven comments recorded which indicated that focus and concentration were needed in order to be successful in sport. Intensity or a lack of intensity was indicated to be responsible for success and/or failure on nineteen occasions.

The message that focus, intensity and concentration are needed in order to be successful was clearly made. Professional and major college athletes may be justifiably expected to concentrate, focus and play with a high level of intensity (even though they do not always do so). They are

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being paid to perform and their performance affects their job security and playing time.

In the workplace, working with a high degree of efficiency results in maximum production. The model worker will toil with focus, intensity and concentration and will not stray from the task at hand until completion of the task has occurred.

In youth sport and school sponsored athletic programs, however, it may be unrealistic for coaches to expect children to be as focused as the professionals (McPhearson, 1978). Never the less, sports programming, such as SportsCenter may contribute to coaches having such expectations. When coaches have unrealistically high expectations for narrow focus upon performance, sharply focused concentration and high levels of intensity, they may take the fun out of sport for many young athletes. Athletes observed at practice joking, socializing, and trying to do things their way are punished then ordered to get back on the straight and narrow path which leads to success. They are encouraged to get back to work and focus on their "jobs".

Work Hard: Fun and Love Are Not Needed

Children participate in organized sports programs primarily because they like to play the game, or because they think that it will be fun to play (Bavolek, 1993). One

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prime reason for them quitting youth sport is that it is no longer fun.

Do individuals participating in professional and major college sport have fun? On nine occasions athletes/coaches stated that they had fun playing/coaching. On the other hand, three comments were made which indicated that fun could not be had if a loss occurred. One athlete stated, "They had all of the fun, they won." Another quipped, "If I was close [to first], I could have fun." Finally, one athlete said bluntly, "We had no fun, we lost." Fun is equated with winning (Eitzen and Sage, 1997)

Athletes and journalists mentioned playing for the love of the game on six occasions. It became apparent that the athletes and coaches featured on SportsCenter rarely expressed a love for the game. It was also rare for them to state that sport was fun. What was the reason for participating?

Sixty-one comments were recorded which indicated that sport participation was a job or that an athlete was supposed to work while participating in sport. It was stated that the athletes were to, "go to the office," and/or, "take care of business." It was stated that athletes should/did work hard in games. Comments were made indicating that individuals should work hard to reach their athletic goals and that hard work made in the athletic

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setting pays off. Admiration was expressed for athletes' work ethic.

Based upon the comments made during the SportsCenter telecasts viewed for this study, the purpose for sport participation was winning. It was indicated that winning comes about as the result of work. Athletes should work. Fun and love for the game aren't necessary, production is. The parallels to the world of work are clear. One must prepare for a job and work to the best of their ability in order to be successful.

Youth sport coaches may be influenced by this message . They may grow to accept that sport is/should be work. They may not accept the notion that sport should be played simply for fun. The outcome becomes more important than the enjoyment of the game (Nixon and Frey, 1996). They accept the idea that the best players should be placed into the positions in which they will be the most productive. If young athletes do not wish to work hard to improve, or if they have little talent, then there is really no reason for them to play at all. When young athletes grow up, do they become sedentary adults because they feel have learned that if you cannot play well, then you may as well not play at all?

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Give it Your All and Don't Quit

It was stated that athletes should play hard, be dedicated and give one-hundred percent when they participate on twenty-one occasions. It was conveyed to viewers that one should fight to the end and not quit on thirteen occasions. Conceivably, viewers could come to understand that if you play, that you should always play to the best of your ability and that to let up or quit is wrong. Accordingly, workers should see a job to its completion and quitting (not achieving) is deemed by some to be reflective of poor character, incompetence or laziness (Eitzen and Sage, 1997).

Young athletes often have many interests outside of sport. They may even participate in more that one sport at the same time (for example, soccer and baseball during the spring). As a result, it is improbable that the athlete could give all that he or she has to one sport. Conflicts/distractions may occur because of family, church or school activities. The athlete's performance may suffer. Practices and competitive events may be missed. Progress may be slower than is desired.

Is it wrong for children to participate in sport under such circumstances? Are athletes "cheating sport and themselves" if they give less than total dedication to it?

Based upon the professional sports model, the answer would be yes. The model demands total dedication.

For centuries, American men were expected to dedicate their lives to their jobs and to put all that they had into them. If a man did not put all he had into his job, what was life worth to him (Wenner, 1993)? Many men missed time with their wives and children as they worked to achieve success (Messner, 1996). They may have neglected their health and missed out on the rewards of recreation. All for their job. Perhaps the message proclaiming the importance of total dedication to sport or work is functional in the achievement of success/winning, but it may serve to impede the development and maintenance of relationships and health.

There's More to Life than Sport

It was surprising, yet refreshing, to find thirteen comments made indicating that there was more to life than sport. The comments were made in conjunction with stories concerning death, health, family and interpersonal relationships.

There is more to life than one's work, although work can provide a sense of fulfillment. Individuals who focus upon sport or work to the detriment of their health, family and other aspects of life might be well served by taking this message to heart. Could it be that workers/athletes with balance in their lives are happier and more productive?

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Be Confident

Confidence was commented upon forty-one times over the course of data collection. It was clear that athletes must possess high levels of confidence in order to be successful. Journalists, coaches and athletes were quick to state that confidence contributed to success or that doubt contributed to failure.

The comments recorded during data collection gave no indication as to how confidence could be obtained. Generally, it appeared as if the athletes or coaches could conjure up confidence on demand. The idea that confidence just becomes a part of an individual's psyche borders upon the ridiculous. It causes a lot of harm in youth sport and school athletic programs. Coaches often state that, "You can do it, just have confidence in yourself." Sometimes, these coaches fail to see that if they fail to teach the skills, the athlete will not be successful and that without success, confidence will not thrive. Success is needed for confidence to be felt in sport and in the workplace.

Teamwork/Cohesion

Twenty-four comments were made which indicated that individuals must work together and get along in order for a team to be successful. It has been stated that learning to play as a part of a team is one of the values which are taught/reinforced in youth sport and school athletic

programs (Eitzen, 1996). This value is functional in the American workplace as well. Coaches and players that watch televised sports news programming such as SportsCenter would be encouraged to promote and accept the value of teamwork and cohesion.

Win/Be Successful

With the reporting of the results of every contest during all SportsCenter telecasts, the idea that winning and losing took place was conveyed. The number of reports of scores and victories was not recorded for analysis in this study. Of interest were comments which indicated the importance and/or meaning of winning and losing.

There were thirty-one comments made regarding winning, while twenty comments were recorded concerning losing. Most striking were the number of comments made (N=17) which indicated that winning the championship (NBA, NFL, NCAA) was what sport was all about. For example, one NBA player stated, "All that matters is winning the championship."

The majority of comments made about losing indicated that losing was disappointing or that it hurt. Losing was said to have caused athletes to become ill, torn up, or that they felt like it was the end of the world. One coach stated that he wanted players on his team that hated losing. Only once was it indicated that losing was acceptable: a coach said that the loss was not a problem since his team

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had played well. On two occasions it was stated that the individual or team could learn form the loss.

When winning and championships are considered what sport is all about, second place may as well be last place. This view is unfortunate. The problem is that there is only one champion. Perhaps those finishing some place lower than first may be champions in their own right. This possibility was not presented as a viable alternative to the winning is everything credo of professionalized sport.

In the world of work, not reaching an acceptable level of success (winning), may result in firings, the denial of advancement or raises. Individuals not making it to the top may consider themselves failures. This is unfortunate, since many achieve a lot, despite the fact that they never reached the top. In actuality, they may have been quite successful (Messner, 1996).

Luck, Magic and Religion Impact Performance and Success

Sport is rife with uncertainty. Performances by players may be up or down from day to day due to a myriad of influences. The ball may take a bad bounce resulting in an uncharacteristic loss or in a poor performance. The weather may turn bad affecting playing conditions and the quality of play. As the level of uncertainty increases, the reliance of individuals upon magic (taboos, rituals and fetishes) is expected to increase (Malinowski, 1948). Research conducted

on major league baseball players added support for the operation of the Malinowski Hypothesis in the sport environment (Gmelsch, 1971).

Life, like sport, is full of uncertainty. It also poses many questions which are answered through traditional religions. Many sport participants believe that God has helped them to be successful and engage in prayer to in an effort to enhance their performance (Eitzen and Sage, 1997; Sage, 1993).

Over the course of this study, religion, magic and luck were commented upon seventy-three times. Christ, God, prayer and blessings were commented upon twenty-five times. Magic (taboos, rituals and superstitions) was mentioned on twenty occasions. Good or bad luck was mentioned during telecasts on twenty eight occasions.

Journalists and athletes conveyed to viewers the belief/observation that much of the success and failure taking place within the athletic setting is actually beyond their ultimate control. This message, if understood by the masses, would assist coaches, athletes and fans in accepting physical limitations (I was not Blessed) and occasional errors (The ball took a bad bounce).

In the larger society, understanding that lucky breaks, blessings (genetic predispositions, environmental factors, etc.) or prayer may have an affect upon one's life may

provide comfort and rationale for one's current standing in life, while providing hope for a better life.

Interestingly, Americans like to think that they can control all aspects of their life. It has been said that luck is the result of preparation and opportunity.

You Can Do It

Upset victories were mentioned nineteen times. In actuality, there was no way for viewers to know if the victory was an upset. Some reported upsets seemed minor, for example a number four seed defeating a number one seed in tennis. Other victories seemed unexpected and therefore worthy of the term "upset". For example an Ivy League team, Princeton, defeated UCLA in the NCAA basketball tournament.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the reporting of upsets is the wide acceptance of the myth that on a given day any one team or player can defeat any other. Though the myth may serve as a source of inspiration and motivation for coaches and players, it may also contribute to abusive behavior, depression and disappointment.

In America, it is believed that anyone can achieve what they set out to do, provided that they work hard enough. The upset victory exemplifies this in a tangible way. The reporting of upset victories keeps this myth alive.

Summary

The SportsCenter telecasts viewed during the collection of data for this study did contain comments which would socialize viewers to hold beliefs and to engage in behaviors which are reflective of what is considered functional in the world of sport and in the world of work.

Viewers may have learned that they should strive to be successful (win) in sport and in life. The means to success is hard work and dedication. While pursuing success, focus, concentration and intensity are required. One must not believe that failure will occur - confidence must be high during the quest. All who try will make it if they do not quit, provided that they work long and hard enough. Leaders are hired to lead. Their job depends upon the success of the organization.

Individuals must work together and get along as the team (corporate or athletic) strives to meet its goals. It should be understood that luck or devine intervention may significantly affect one's performance.

Life is complex and many demands are placed upon individuals in terms of their time and talents. Work/Sport is an important part of life and can be a source of fulfillment, but there may be things more important in life than work/sport.

The messages conveyed through the sport news programming viewed for this study reflect the attitudes, values and behaviors necessary for success in the world of work. The concern is that children and adults may continue to make youth sport more professionalized and work-like than it already is. Youth sport has become work-like in recent decades (Nixon and Frey, 1996; Leonard, 1993). Perhaps, not long from now, it will simply **be** work. The objectives of fun and enjoyment will be deemed irrelevant and considered something to be desired only by losers.

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